

LOOKING FOR GAS AND OIL SHOWS PROMISE NEAR WILLSALL

By Peter Vandergrift

Drilling for natural gas and oil shows promise in northern Park County, as teams of Wyoming roughnecks work and sometimes play in the area.

"They are all very well-behaved and good guys," said Mandy Sarrazin, of the Bank Bar in Willsall. "They support the local economy, and it's good for business."

There are two Bill Barrett Corporation test wells north of Willsall, complete with housing and cooking facilities for about the 40 workers, known as roughnecks, who keep the wells flowing with hydrocarbons, like natural gas.

A spokesman for the oil and gas company, Duane Zavadil, said he could reveal little about what the wells might produce because of federal regulations, but he did say the wells have bought up natural gas from deposits found miles deep below geologic swells.

On Wednesday, a flaming tower, called a flare stack, burned off gasses next to a well named Draco as a crew of four roughnecks loaded 30-foot lengths of 3.5-inch diameter pipe onto flatbed trucks.

The 300-pound pipes were removed from the well to be replaced with a smaller diameter pipe.

Some of the gas is burned off, while the rest is stored in tanks. The well will be capped to await further exploration.

If enough deposits of natural gas are found to make the exploratory venture profitable, the next step would be to construct a pipeline from the fields to the closest existing pipe line, about 50 miles away, Zavadil said.

Natural gas can not be shipped by truck, he said.

But more exploration will be needed, and more test wells will have to be drilled before building an expensive pipeline could be profitable, he said.

How it's done

On-site operations are overseen by Kenny Sanders, who worked for Halliburton for 25 years before getting a job with Bill Barrett Corp.

Sanders explained the well was drilled using liquids heavier than water, oil or gas, to keep the fluid in the ground. After testing how well they flowed through the larger diameter pipe and testing the extracted liquids for densities of hydrocarbons, crews put smaller diameter piping into the ground.

Smaller-diameter piping helps the well flow faster without the aid of a pump, he said.

Putting the pipe in and out of the hole is called "tripping pipe," explained Nyal Allen.

Allen and his two roughneck friends, Darol Richardson and Robby Jundt, agreed the toughest job at the oil fields is tripping pipe on the derrick tower, a metal scaffolding that climbs 60 feet into the air.

"We don't have to invest in a Bowflex or StairMaster," joked Allen of the workout-like qualities of his job.

The base of the rig is surrounded by heavy plastic tarps, and heat is blown in to keep the men warm and the tools working. But up on the derrick tower's small platform, where a bloc and pulley are used to raise and lower pipes, the workers are exposed to the weather.

On the tower, a length of pipe is stood on end and held in place while it is fastened to the a nub of pipe sticking out of the ground at the base of the rig. The pipe is lowered into the ground, and the next piece is lifted for the procedure to begin again. The crew does this in reverse order to remove pipe.

Roughneck camaraderie

Just after noon, the three workers microwaved a clam chowder lunch in an old, propane-heated school bus.

"It's their home away from home," Sanders said.

The small bus was a tight fit with even a few people trying to maneuver in it, but close quarters are part of the job and camaraderie makes the two-week long shift bearable, said Richardson.

"It's a little tough around the holidays," he said

With the well working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, there is always something to do, but when they are not working, the roughnecks take time for some fun.

A homemade roping dummy that sits outside the bus allows them to work on their loops. Jundt was on the rodeo team when he attended New Mexico State University. He went to the college rodeo finals for bull riding.

Aside from roping, all of the crew have a Montana fishing license and drive the 40 or so miles down to the Yellowstone River to fish as often as they can.

Although the foursome have spent some time at bars in Bozeman, they said they preferred Livingston and Wilsall.

"The people in Livingston have been great," said Bill Lehnert, known in the roughneck business as a "pusher," or crew leader. "And we may have officially been kicked out of a few places in Bozeman."

Lehnert is older than the other three crew members, and before he worked on oil rigs he was an arborist, but needed more money to raise his family back in Lander, Wyo.

The exploratory project started some years ago when men like Perry Bailey were contracted to lease mineral rights from landowners around Wilsall and Ringling.

Perry leased rights from ranchers and landowners for about \$10 per acre, plus a percentage of anything extracted, he said.